

## The Family Next Door

One wall, another culture. Who would have guessed that a family dinner with our next-door neighbors would reveal so much striking contrast from family hierarchy to how *natto* is eaten?

It was a bewildering but exciting experience visiting an apartment identical to ours but with a completely unique ambiance. As we took seats and began to enjoy the dinner, certain differences soon revealed themselves. My father was the chef in my family, but their mother cooked, and for our appetizer, she served us *natto* on mini toasts! We only ate *natto* on rice. Although the floor plans were identical, how they made use of the adjoining *tatami* room was also different: my dad, who emphasized the importance of studying, had created a study whilst theirs was a second living room. Most importantly, their unspoken house rule always put the father first: he sat down before the other members and was always served first, after the guests, of course. This new finding was intriguing. Although we were both average Japanese families, living in the same town, the same apartment building, on the same floor, our familial practices stood in contrast. This was my lightbulb moment: the differences in cultural practices were also apparent at the family level, which explains why people have differing views of how life should be.

House rules are cultural traditions; they are passed down from generation to generation, and shape ways of thinking. This explains why values transcend generations within families but not necessarily across families living in the same era. Growing up with disparate sets of house rules from different backgrounds, we hold dissimilar values. Before, I thought my family's ways were normal, but, upon reflection, there seemed to be no absolute *normal* anymore. Perhaps, it is an outcome of subjectivism in postmodernity, in which each looked for their own proper values. Therefore, just as our familial hierarchies were different, not all of what one thinks of as common sense is common sense to others. For that reason, we need to be scrupulous when interacting with others because an action we think is appropriate could be interpreted otherwise – perhaps they thought my mother was too lazy to cook

when really, she was too busy working. This may seem inconsequential, but it's crucial because miscommunication could result in conflict if one is offended by another's actions.

However, paranoia surrounding our differences could divorce us from any connections at all. Our lack of confidence in the validity of our actions results in fewer real-world interactions outside of our immediate circles and more online communities in which people can hide behind their virtual profiles and feel less responsibility for their actions. The lack of confidence could also account for people who consider themselves *komyushou* (asocial people) and *hikikomori* (recluses who withdrew from society by living in self-imposed confinement). From an early age, Japanese children are taught never to cause discomfort to others. If someone helps us, we are taught to feel more sorry than thankful. The encouragement of conformity in Japanese culture induces eccentrics to hide away from society. Distancing ourselves from interactions removes the possibility of conflict. However, I experienced it differently overseas: complete strangers complimented me on my tote bag, offered me help when I seemed lost, or just asked me where I was from; they were trivial but they really made my day. These show that it is possible to defeat the fear of encountering conflicts.

There is, of course, always a risk of encountering conflict from misinterpretation, but embracing the potential for conflict is also an essential part of engaging with others because doing so results in deeper intimacy when the dispute is resolved. Communication is indispensable to overcoming conflict with the understanding of each other's differences. We must not let our differences in values restrain us from forming real-world connections, because those differences make each of us unique, and social interactions more meaningful: I would never have discovered how lucky I am to have my dad as our family chef and the delicacy that is *natto* on toast. [674 words]